THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE (SHRI RAMAKANT D. KHALAP): (a) Government are aware of the illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 which was part of an omnibus Bill passed by the US Congress in 1996 and signed by the US President on September 30, 1996, from which date it comes into force. The Act does not target India specifically and applies to foreign nationals staying in the US illegally beyond periods authoritzed in their non-immigrant visa. Press reports, therefore, of the forced repatriation of thousands of Indian doctors from the US are not accurate.

(b) and (c) Do not arise.

Release of Indian Children by Pakistan

3501. SHRI IQBAL SINGH:
SHRI SUSHILKUMAR SAMBHAJIRAO SHINDE:
SHRIMATI VEENA VERMA:
SHRI S.M. KRISHNA:

Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether Pakistan has of late freed the 38 Indian children incarcerated in Pak Jails as a goodwill gesture and returned them to India, to create a propitious atmosphere for the forthcoming Foreign Secretaries level talks between the two countries;

(b) if so, when these children reached India and whether they urged for early release of other fishermen in Pak-custody also lest they meet their death in jails; and

(c) the Government's response thereto and the results of talks since held at Foreign Secretaries level?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE (SHRI RAMAKANT D. KHALAP): (a) In March 1997, Pakistan released 38 Indian children who were under detention in Pakistan since 1994. These children were travelling on Indian fishing vessls which were apprehended by Pakistani authorities. It was stated by Pakistan that this gesture was to create a propitious climate for the Foreign Secretary talks which were held from 28—31 March, 1997 in New Delhi.

(b) The children reached Mumbai on 23rd March, 1997 and were reported to have called for early release of other detainees in Pakistani custody.

(c) Government is anxious to secure the earliest possible release of detained fishermen. The Pakistani authorities have been contacted on many occasions in this regard, including during the Foreign Secretary level talks. It is hoped that early progress will be made on this issue.

Nepal's suggestion for collaboration among SAARC countries

3502. DR. MOHAN BABU: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Nepalese delegation to the conference of the SAARC Council of Ministers held in December, 1996 had presented a paper advocating collaboration between India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan for developing continuous parts of the four countries in the areas of water, electricity, transport, trade, communication, etc.;

(b) if so, the broad details thereof; and

(c) India's reaction to this concept and whether any initiative is proposed to be taken by India, in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE (SHRI RAMAKANT D. KHALAP): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir. The paper presented by the Government of Nepal broadly included promotion of sub-regional economic cooperation by engaging Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India through a series of comprehensive expert studies to help implement the concept of sub-regional cooperation in the core economic sector. The proposal envisaged utilising economies of scale for mutual benefit through a three phase plan.

(c) India welcomed this initiative of economic cooperation involving the four countries of South Asia and has participated in the Foreign Secretary-level meeting held at Kathmandu on April 2, 1997. It was agreed at the meeting that the objective of the "growth quadrangle" is to create an enabling environment for rapid economic development through identification and implementation of specific projects of cooperation in the core economic sectors of multi-modal transportation and communication, energy, trade and investment facilitation and promotion, tourism, natural resources and environment.

The Foreign Ministers of the four countries met in New Delhi on April 8, 1997 and formally launched the sub-regional economic cooperation initiative. They reaffirmed their commitment to pursue sub-regional economic cooperation for accelerating economic growth, overcoming infrastructural constraints and making optimal use of sub-regional complementaries.

Death of Indian Hajis in Mecca

3503. SHRIMATI KAMLA SINHA:
SHRI PARAG CHALIHA:
SHRI SHIV CHARAN SINGH:

Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether a large number of Indian Hajis (pilgrims) to Mecca died in fire that broke out there last week;

(b) if so, the details of the deceased and of the wounded; and

(c) the details of efforts made by Government to bring the survivors safe to India?

THE MINISTER OF STATE OF THE MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE (SHRI RAMAKANT D. KHALAP): (a) and (b) The fire that broke out in the pilgrim camps in Mina near Mecca on April 15, 1997, led to a number of casualties among the Indian pilgrims. As of today the total number of identified dead is 119 and the number of injured persons receiving treatment in Saudi Government hospitals is 148. In addition another 265 persons were injured in the fire. Of this number, 172 are receiving treatment from the Indian medical mission in Mecca. The total number of injured is estimated at approximately a little over 400.

(c) Government has offered to fly back to India all our injured pilgrims who were medically fit to travel by a special charter flight. However, the injured pilgrims have preferred to complete their stay in Mecca as previously scheduled and to return to India by their assigned charter flights. Those pilgrims who lost their travel documents in the fire are issued duplicate documents expeditiously and free of cost. Several of the injured who were discharged earlier after receiving treatment in hospitals have since returned to India. Other are awaiting their assigned return flights for India as per the Haj charter schedule. These pilgrims continue to be under observation by the Indian medical mission deployed in Mecca and Madina and are being rendered necessary medical care until their scheduled flights. The Haj charter flights have commenced the return journey of pilgrims beginning from 21 April. The last of the pilgrims will return by May 22. On an average 1600 pilgrims are returning to India every day. As of date about 20,000 pilgrims have reached India. Names of injured pilgrims on each return flight are being conveyed in advance by Air India office in Jeddah so as to facilitate their reception on arrival in Delhi and other entry points as well as prompt medical attention to them and their movement to hospitals and clinics as required. The reception of the pilgrims returning to India is being handled by the concerned State Haj Committee in coordination with MEA, Air India, immigration and customs authorities.

Envoys recruited from among politicians

3504. SHRI PARAG CHALIHA:
SHRI SHIV CHARAN SINGH:

Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state: